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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

the wine-shop, who picture him first of all as a vulgar sot, will have a change of heart after reading this biography. Paul Verlaine had noble traits, he had lovable traits; and these went into his poetry. *Agnes Lee Freer*

SLAVIC POETRY

Modern Russian Poetry, selected and translated by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Anthology of Modern Slavonic Literature, translated by P. Selver. E. P. Dutton & Co.

Modern Czech Poetry, translated by P. Selver. E. P. Dutton & Co.

An Anthology of Yugoslav Poetry. Edited by Dr. B. S. Stanoyevich. Richard G. Badger.

The vigor and elegantly tutored violence of the Russian ballet, the drastic investigations and discoveries of Russian fiction, the naive splendor of Russian painting, and Russian music with its delicate French soul in a rioting body, may lead you to expect, in Russian poetry, something equally vivid and fresh, a balancing surprise. You may be prepared, as I was, to add to the French and English—the only modern literatures, so far as I can discover, that have a life and character of their own and enjoy the distinction of possessing masterpieces—a Russian literature embodying that figment of the European imagination, the Slavic Soul.

Modern Russian Poetry, if approached with such expectations, will bring a somewhat chilly disillusion. For until the last pages there are no particularly arresting poems. And the last poems, while they deal with events that may be localized, have fortunately no local flavor. They are written in the tone and from the attitude of the modern man everywhere in the world; in the same idiom and with the same ratiocination.

In many ways the haunting anachronism of Russia's political machine has stalked and parried its poems. One feels not only confusion, but even evasion, of realities. Russian poets have been led to sentimentalize their attitude to the land, to life, to the peasantry, to the misery of Russia. Patriotism and Revolution trespass continually, and are unpleasantly immobilized in figures of speech. And too often the poets' exaltation is the rapid breath of running away; their simplicity, the content of hasty refuge.

Russian life is too tentative, too provisional. *If* stands stark in the thinking; the hurdle of every decision. To my mind, it has been the reason for much of the mysticism. Much of the pessimism and despair is also traceable to this ghastly warning. To be faced continually with this lean and quick-legged and always outstripping *If* is finally to lose hope.

Alexander Blok in his wonderful *Scythians* repeats it. Russia is undecided, wavering. She is between East and West, between a beloved betrayer and his foe ambushed

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by her elbow. Magnificent and challenging is the poem; a clue to the instability of Russian life.

As this anthology reveals it, we have the poetry of a troubled minor literature, exceedingly rich in promise. Unless it is a mere activity of sick nerves, the intensity of life in Russia today should bring great poetry—is bringing a hint of it in the poetry of the minute.

The book may be regarded also as a fine contribution to English literature. Never is one conscious that the work is a translation. For the approximately one hundred and twenty Russian poems which have been rendered, parallel English poems have been created.

The notes are perhaps too copious. They make of the book almost a guide to Russian literature, with excerpts for illustration. The method betrays itself most keenly when, in the case of Baratynsky, a closely printed paragraph of two hundred words introduces a verselet of six puny lines whose banality too impudently satirizes the expectations raised by the fattening preface.

To realize that nationalism has made a great master of Pushkin is to appreciate the unhappy effects of this virtuoso emotion, proud of the iridescence of stagnation. Reports come that young poets are harking back to Pushkin—it is pitiful, with so many powerful men about them.

To me the book's area of interest begins with Valery Brusov, although stray poems before him paint the desert. Ivanov, Blok, Byely, Kluyev, Yesenin, Oreshin, and Marienhof—these shouting, a bit strident, a bit knowing,

but independent and conscious young poets are the poets of Russia. The buzzing Pushkin, the crooning Lermontov, the ballyhooing Konstantin Balmont, are the bad starts of Russian poetry.

These young men write as original poets are writing in England, France and America. Marienhof might almost be a Russian visit of Ezra Pound:

Jesus is on the Cross again, and Barrabas
We escort, mealy-mouthed, down the Tverskoi Prospekt. . .
Who will interrupt, who? The gallop of Scythian horses?
Violins bowing the Marseillaise?

.
Pile rubbish, all the rubbish in a heap;
And like Savonarola, to the sound of hymns,
Into the fire with it. . . Whom should we fear?—
When the mundiculi of puny souls have become—worlds.

A quatrain from Yesenin contains an image that has obsessed me:

From empty straths, a slender arch ascending:
Fog curls upon the air and, moss-wise, grows;
And evening, low above the wan streams bending,
In their white waters washes his blue toes.

These whispers will not give any suggestion of the full-throated singing of the two poets quoted. For these, and their splendid company in the last half of the book, redeem the whole book; make it about as valuable as any book of poetry recently issued in America.

Mr. Selver's *Anthology of Slavonic Literature* attempts too much, and therefore the results are negligible. The job might as well not have been done. To represent

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adequately the prose of Russia, Poland, Bohemia, Jugoslavia, etc., in one ordinary volume, and pack in the poetry of these peoples as well, is so obviously futile that it is a wonder to me that so accomplished an editor and critic tried to do it.

Mr. Selver's book of Czech verse is admirable, however. The translation flavor is sometimes on these verses, but it gives an exotic aroma which makes one pleasantly aware of tasting something foreign. One feels that the pre-contemporary Czech poets were stronger and more robust than their brothers in Russia. This little book will serve as a companion to *Modern Russian Poetry*, although different in spirit and manner, and even in format. The original texts are included.

Space is lacking for extracts, which indeed would give scarcely a hint of the quality of some of the poetry in this book; but I wish to call attention to a remarkable nationalist, whose utterance has the stark obsessive simplicity of frenzy, and is extraordinarily effective: Pietr Bezruc, whose poems are too long and continuous for quotation. They are written somewhat in the sweeping manner of Whitman, who has strongly influenced Czech poetry.

The Stanoyevich anthology is mentioned last because it has so little affinity with the others. Its title is anomalous, for all the poetry given is folk-song. The specimens given are melodious, charming, but a bit one-stringed and monotonous.

Isidor Schneider